ROBERT DICKSON, THE FUR TRADE, AND THE MINNESOTA BOUNDARY¹

It has been a frequent occurrence in history that a few men in some distant room, ignorant of many of the matters which are the subjects of negotiation, indifferent to the wishes of the people most deeply concerned, or influenced by more weighty political considerations, have determined the political allegiance of millions of people, the ownership of vast regions, and the prosperity of future states. By right of exploration and occupation prior to 1818 Minnesota should now be a part of the British Empire rather than one of the United States; but the British commissioners at Paris in 1783, at Ghent in 1814, and at London in 1818 were not aware of their rights, were indifferent to the claims of English subjects, or permitted the menace of the European situation to weaken their grasp on the Northwest.² It is true that this exploration was done by, or in the interest of, the fur-trader, and that this occupation consisted of a few dozen trading posts of a more or less permanent nature; yet the exploration was so thorough that there was scarcely a stream in the state that was not a thoroughfare for the traders' canoes, and the occupation was so complete that no Indian tribe was without its trading post.

A better understanding of the early British claim on Minnesota can be obtained, perhaps, by a brief sketch of the life of Robert Dickson, one of the most prominent of the British traders in the Northwest. He entered this region at a time, 1786, when English occupation was being firmly established, and his death, in 1823, occurred only a few years after the last hope of English domination had vanished. As was the case with many of his associates in the wilderness, Dickson's

¹ Read on January 19, 1925, at the seventy-sixth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society.

² Thomas Hodgins, British and American Diplomacy Affecting Canada, 1782-1899 (Toronto, 1900).

character and training were wholly at variance with life in the Indian country. His father was a well-to-do merchant in Dumfries, Scotland: his mother, the daughter of the minister of St. Michaels; his letters show him to have been a man of education; his character gained for him the confidence of men in places of responsibility; he was a member of the famous Beaver Club, which included the aristocracy of Montreal and of the fur trade; he is said to have been a firm Presbyterian, as one might guess from his ancestry; and he impressed those with whom he came in contact with his humanity, his gentlemanly bearing, and his pleasing personality.3 Yet, when family misfortunes drove him to the New World, he chose to spend the remainder of his life, nearly forty years, in the wilderness, where gentlemanly bearing, humane feelings, religious faith, and strength of character would seem to be handicaps rather than aids to success.

Dickson's apprenticeship in the fur trade was typical of that of many men of the time. He first appeared at Mackinac, where he served as clerk and storekeeper in the Indian department from 1786 to 1788. A part of his duty seems to have been to aid in the distribution of the king's presents to the Indians in their hunting grounds, for he is found going by way of Green Bay and Prairie du Chien to the villages on the St. Peter's and returning to Mackinac with the spring fur fleets. Since his wages were paid in goods from the king's stores, it is probable that he acquired a taste for a trader's life at this

² Frederick Bates to Meriwether Lewis, November 7, 1807, Bates Papers, in the possession of the Missouri Historical Society; Niles' Weekly Register, 7: 173 (November 19, 1814); Zebulon M. Pike, Expeditions to Headwaters of the Mississippi River, through Louisiana Territory, and in New Spain, during the Years 1805-6-7, 1: 120 (Coues edition, New York, 1895); "William Powell's Recollections," in Wisconsin Historical Society, Proceedings, 1912, p. 158; James E. Kerr, "Sketch of the Life of Hon. William Dickson," in Niagara Historical Society, [Publications], no. 30, p. 19-21 (Welland, 1917); George Bryce and Wilfred Campbell, The Scotsman in Canada, 2: 205 (Toronto, 1911); Edward D. Neill, History of Minnesota from the Earliest French Explorations to the Present Time, 291 n. (fourth edition, Minneapolis, 1882).

time, formed his acquaintanceship with the Sioux, and learned about the regions which sent the best furs to Mackinac. Ten years later he wintered at Sauk Rapids with Joseph Renville and Jacques Porlier. Not long after, accounts appeared concerning Robert Dickson and Company, which was a small partnership apparently intended to remove competition for the best trading grounds. Its membership probably was not constant, but at one time or another it included, besides Dickson, James and George Aird, Thomas G. Anderson, Jacques Porlier, Joseph Rolette, Allen Wilmot, John Lawe, Jacob Franks, the Grignons, and probably others. These men, with the exception of Lawe, Franks, and possibly some of the Grignons, traded within the present limits of Minnesota.⁴

At the time of Pike's journey up the Mississippi the valleys of that river and of the St. Peter's were well occupied by the posts of British traders. Pike mentioned in his journal Dickson's posts on the Rum River, at Sauk Rapids, and at Leech Lake, and those of the Northwest Company stretching across the state from Fond du Lac by way of Sandy Lake, Leech Lake, Upper Red Cedar Lake, and Whitefish Lake. Of course this includes only those posts which came under his direct observation. From a letter written by Pike to Dickson on February 26, 1806, protesting against illegal trade, one gets the impression that Minnesota above the Falls of St. Anthony was the undisputed hunting ground of British traders.⁵

Below the falls the evidence in support of a similar conclusion is almost as convincing. In their report of this region Lewis and Clark stated that the trade of the Mdewakanton, Wahpekute, and Wahpeton bands of the Sioux was in the

^a Joseph Tassé, in Canadiens de l'ouest, 1:133 (second edition, Montreal, 1878); "Personal Narrative of Capt. Thomas G. Anderson," in Wisconsin Historical Collections, 9:178; Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 11:524-574; Neill, Minnesota, 236; T. Blackwood to J. and A. McGill and Company, June 8, 1806, Blackwood Letter Book. A photostatic copy of this letter book, the original of which is in the library of McGill University, Montreal, is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵ Pike, Expeditions, 1:117 n., 189, 153-155, 157, 174, 193 n., 196, 261.

hands of John Campbell, Dickson, and other merchants from Mackinac. They described the hunting grounds of these bands as extending from Otter Tail Portage to the White and the Little Sioux rivers, and from the James and the Missouri to the Wisconsin. They met James Aird, one of Dickson's partners, near the mouth of the Vermilion River.⁶

Of the exact locations of many of the fur posts in southern Minnesota at this time historians are not at all certain. Anderson traded on the St. Peter's for many years, yet there is no record of the location of his posts, except of one at Pike's Island. Murdoch Cameron had a post at Lac qui Parle until his death in 1811, after which it is probable that some one of Dickson's associates took possession of it until after the War of 1812, when Joseph Renville, Jr., traded there. Dickson, himself, had a post on the east shore of Lake Traverse, opposite the favorite camp site of Red Thunder, his brother-in-law. It was probably the permanent home of his family. He had other stations at Leaf Lake and on the Des Moines River among the Iowa.7 In this region below the falls, however, there were some American traders. Pike wrote about traders on the St. Peter's who observed the laws, in contradistinction to the British: it is known that Jean Baptiste Faribault claimed American citizenship; and it is probable that John Campbell and other Americans of Prairie du Chien traded among the Sioux of southern Minnesota. Yet the uncertainty regarding American traders shows how slight a part they played in the commerce of this region. From the foregoing data it is clear

⁶ Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804–1806, 5:374; 6:93 (New York, 1904–05).

⁷ Bates to Lewis, November 7, 1807; Bates to Dickson, March 8, 1808, Bates Papers; Benjamin O'Fallon to Ninian Edwards, February 19, 1818, in Niles' Weekly Register, 14:388 (August 1, 1818); Anderson, in Wisconsin Historical Collections, 9:181; Bryce and Campbell, The Scotsman in Canada, 2:293; Samuel J. Brown, "Biographic Sketch of Chief Gabriel Renville," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 10:614 (part 2); William W. Warren, "History of the Ojibways," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 5:370.

that the fur trade of Minnesota was almost entirely in the control of the British before the War of 1812; and that, with the exception of the Northwest Company's chain of posts across the northern part of the state, that trade, with both Sioux and Chippewa, was in the hands of Robert Dickson and his associates.

It may be of some interest to notice some of the extravocational activities that fell to the lot of the fur-traders as exemplified in Dickson's life. In 1802 Governor William H. Harrison of Indiana Territory appointed him and John Campbell justices of the peace in St. Clair County; in 1805 Pierre Chouteau reported his bringing to St. Louis for trial an Indian who had murdered two Frenchmen on the St. Peter's: in 1808 Frederick Bates asked him to aid in apprehending some horse thieves among the Iowa; in the same year he acted as Redford Crawford's second in a duel at St. Joseph's Island in which John Campbell was killed; later in the year he appeared at Detroit before the United States land commissioners to furnish proof of ownership of certain lots in Mackinac; and in the following April he was elected a member of the Beaver Club in Montreal. In 1811 as was commonly true in the fur trade, he was smuggling British goods past the collector at Mackinac for trade in Minnesota.8

Although the fur trade appealed to the adventurous spirit of man, it was in the first decades of the nineteenth century

8 "Journal of the Proceedings of the Executive Government of the Indiana Territory," in Indiana Historical Society, Publications, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 110, 112 (Indianapolis, 1895); American State Papers: Public Lands, 1:334, 391; Anderson, in Wisconsin Historical Collections, 9:178; John Askin, Jr., to his father, August 17, 1808, in Wisconsin Historical Collections, 19:325; Niles' Weekly Register, 2:343 (July 25, 1812); E. B. Washburne, ed., The Edwards Papers, 83 (Chicago Historical Collections, vol. 3); Bates to McKinney and to Dickson, March 8, 1808, Bates Papers; Pierre Chouteau to W. H. Harrison, May 10, 1805, Chouteau Letter Book, in the possession of the Missouri Historical Society; Beaver Club Minute Book, April 15, 1809. The original of the latter volume is in the library of McGill University, Montreal; a photostatic copy is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

rarely profitable from an economic standpoint. This was particularly true in the case of the winterer, the man who endured the hardships of the trade. Competition among the traders became so intense that the individual annual returns were greatly lessened and few could meet their credits at the summer rendezvous; Napoleon's closing of the ports of Germany and Russia — two of the best fur markets — to English goods lowered prices; United States duties on English goods lessened profits; the embargo hampered the traders in securing some of their goods for the Indian trade; Wilkinson's order excluding foreigners from trade in Louisiana, although it did not prevent their entry, did add uncertainty to their enterprise; and John Jacob Astor and the United States factories were adding their competition to that of the rival traders. Even the formation of the Michilimackinac Company in 1806 to eliminate the competition among the British traders proved ineffective because of the potency of the remaining adverse conditions.9

Along with this dissatisfaction with trade conditions there developed among the British traders an antagonism toward the people of the United States and their government. Part of this hostility was due to the quarrels between England and the United States, but the feeling was chiefly owing to matters that affected them directly. Anything that limited the Indian hunting grounds or encouraged settlers would be a deathblow aimed at their trade, and they could plainly see that trade was doomed if the United States remained in control of the Northwest. Governor Harrison had persuaded the Indians

⁹ T. Blackwood to J. and A. McGill and Company, June 18, 1806, Blackwood Letter Book; American State Papers: Indian Affairs, 2:62-66; Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 25:217; Wayne E. Stevens, "Fur Trading Companies in the Northwest, 1760–1816," in Mississippi Valley Historical Association, Proceedings, 9:289 (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1918); Louisiana Gazette, October 12, 1811. Files of this newspaper are in the possession of the Missouri Historical Society. It was first published as the Missouri Gazette in July, 1808; later the name was changed to Louisiana Gazette and then to Missouri Gazette and Illinois Advertiser, but in July, 1815, the name of Missouri Gazette was restored.

of Indiana Territory to make cession after cession of their lands to the government, and he intended to open these lands to settlement and either to lead the Indians to take up agriculture or to drive them beyond the Mississippi. 10 Wilkinson's order would exclude the traders from the Louisiana purchase as soon as the government was strong enough to enforce it. and the selection of sites for military posts on the upper river came as a warning that their immunity from control was nearing an end. Many false accusations concerning the effect of the British traders' residence among the Indians were made by American citizens jealous of their trade supremacy.¹¹ Then, too, the sympathy of these British traders must have gone out to the Indians among whom they spent their lives and into whose tribes many of them had married. It was a perfectly justifiable sympathy. The debauching effects of the semicivilization of the American frontier upon the Indian were easily perceivable. Governor Harrison declared that he could without difficulty distinguish Indians who lived far from settlements by their more upright and independent bearing.12 It was easy, also, to see that justice did not mean the same for Indian and for white man. The Indians rightly complained that when one of their young men killed a white man he must be delivered to the white man's court, but when a white man killed an Indian no white jury would convict him.13 There was more sense than humor in the retort of the Canadians. when in the War of 1812 they were accused of using Indians in their armies, that the Americans used the Kentuckians. In reviewing these causes for dissatisfaction, therefore, it is not surprising that the British traders favored Tecumseh's plan

¹⁰ Moses Dawson, Historical Narrative of the Civil and Military Services of Major-general William H. Harrison, 51, 56, 59, 67, 79, 136 (Cincinnati, 1824).

¹¹ Bates to Porlier and Bleakley, November 3, 1809, Bates Papers; Missouri Gazette, October 12, 1816.

¹² Henry Adams, History of the United States, 6:71 (New York, 1891).

¹⁸ Dawson, Harrison, 45, 54, 58, 86, 178; Alexander Davidson and Bernard Stuve, A Complete History of Illinois from 1673 to 1873, 244 (Springfield, 1874).

tor an Indian confederacy which would secure the Indian lands for themselves.

In the war that followed Dickson and the Indians of Wisconsin and Minnesota played an important part. In February, 1812, when the break between the United States and England threatened, General Isaac Brock, governor of Upper Canada, sent a messenger to Dickson asking what support he and his friends could furnish. At the capture of Mackinac on July 17 Dickson was at the head of 143 Sioux, Menominee, and Winnebago. This victory brought most of the northwestern tribes to the aid of the British, probably contributed to the fall of Fort Dearborn, and hastened Hull's surrender at Detroit. These three victories left the Northwest in the hands of the British and their allies. Without these allies it is difficult to believe that the British could have retained Upper Canada. On January 1, 1813, Dickson was commissioned agent for the western Indians for the duration of the war, and later he was made superintendent of the conquered countries. chief duty was to keep the Indians loyal to England, and in this he was successful. Although the aid given by the Sioux was not as great as it might have been, - because of distance from the seat of war, the stratagems of Manuel Lisa on the Missouri, and the unfaithfulness of some of the British traders themselves, — their help at Mackinac had been decisive and even their neutrality would have been welcomed by the British 14

When it was known that negotiations for peace were in progress the settlement regarding the Indian lands became the matter of chief interest to Indian and trader alike. It is

14 William C. H. Wood, ed., Select Documents of the Canadian War of 1812, 1:423 (Champlain Society, Publications, no. 13—Toronto, 1920); John Brannan, Official Letters of the Military and Naval Officers of the United States during the War with Great Britain in the Years 1812, 13, 14, and 15, 33 (Washington, 1823); George Prevost to Dickson, January 14, 1813, in Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 15:219-221; Hiram M. Chittenden, The American Fur Trade of the Far West, 3:899-902 (New York, 1902); Stella Drumm, ed., in John C. Luttig, Journal of a Fur-trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813, 22-24 (St. Louis, 1920).

true that they could not derive much comfort from the treaties and conventions of 1783, 1795, 1803, and 1807, but there was hope that the British commissioners could be induced at this time to right the wrongs involved in these earlier agreements. Prevost, in his instructions to Dickson as agent of the western Indians, said that the Indians should be instructed to insist that the Americans remove back of the Greenville treaty line except in cases where there had been special reserves ceded by treaty. Promises that their lands would be restored had been made to the Indians by other British officials, and it was pointed out to them that the peace negotiations were being prolonged at Ghent because of England's demands for their lands. 6

Nor was there any doubt as to the attitude of the traders toward the land settlement. Alexander McKenzie many years before had suggested as the most reasonable interpretation of the treaty of 1783 that the line between Lake Superior and the Lake of the Woods should follow the old Indian route by way of the St. Louis River to its source and thence by waters falling into the latter lake. He probably hoped for the acquisition of the Grand Portage by the British.¹⁷ The traders of 1814, however, had in mind far more than McKenzie's trivial requirement. Their most definite suggestion was made by the trading house of Inglis, Ellice, and Company, to Lord Bathurst, secretary of state for war and the colonies, in May, 1814. After recounting the errors committed through ignorance of the rights and interests of the Indians and traders by the treaties of 1783 and 1795, their frequent representations to

¹⁵ Dr. Clarence W. Alvord summarizes these agreements in a paper entitled "When Minnesota Was a Pawn of International Politics," ante, 4:309–330.

¹⁶ Prevost to Dickson, January 14, 1813, in Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 15: 219–221; Ernest Cruickshank, ed., Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Niagara Frontier, 1812–1814, 4: 36; 5: 125 (Welland, 1896–1908).

¹⁷ Alexander Mackenzie, Voyages from Montreal through the Continent of North America, 8:56 (Philadelphia, 1802).

the ministry, to the governors of Canada, and to the British ministers to the United States, the value of the fur trade to England, the faithful service of the Indians in the British cause, and the oppressive measures of the United States government, they presented a map with four proposed boundary lines between the United States and the Indian territory — a map that must have resembled the plan of the outlying works of a fortification, where, if driven from one, retreat to another was possible. The suggested boundaries were: (1) roughly, the line of the Quebec Act of 1774, that is, the Ohio; (2) again roughly, the Maumee and Great Miami to the Ohio; (3) the Maumee and the Wabash to the Ohio; and (4) the forty-third parallel from Lake St. Clair to Lake Michigan, down the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, up the St. Joseph's River, across to Fort Wayne, and down the Wabash to the Ohio. In all these plans the boundary was to follow the Ohio to its mouth and the Mississippi and the Missouri to the southernmost branch of the latter in the Rocky Mountains. 18 Obviously, of these boundary plans, even the most generous. from the American point of view, placed the northwest fur trade and the Indian allies in British territory and recognized the British conquest of Fort Dearborn, Prairie du Chien, and Mackinac.

It was a great disappointment to both Indians and traders to learn that, although the British commissioners had entered the negotiations with the setting aside of a definite territory for the Indians as a sine qua non, nothing was said in the treaty about the boundary. In fact to English officials and to some Canadian officials the acquisition of and the title to the West were of trifling importance.

Dickson was too much of an optimist to be long discouraged by such untoward events. Since his trade had been destroyed by the war and he himself prohibited from trading

¹⁸ Gordon C. Davidson, *The North West Company*, 296–301 (University of California, *Publications in History*, vol. 7 — Berkeley, 1918).

in the upper Mississippi region, he turned to new projects. Whether he first met Lord Selkirk after the war or had long known him it is not possible to say. At any rate in the summer of 1817 he followed Selkirk to the Red River, was present at a meeting of the earl with the Indians of that region, and gave bond for Selkirk's appearance for trial in Upper Canada when he was arrested for the seizure of Fort William. The next year he accompanied Selkirk to Sandwich for trial.¹⁹

When two visionaries such as Dickson and Selkirk meet fanciful schemes may be expected. Their plan was to attempt to build up a trade in furs among the Sioux of the upper Red River Valley, where Dickson's influence was extensive regardless of the fact that powerful trading companies were already exploiting that region. Old beaver hunters, Indians of the Wisconsin and the upper Mississippi, and some of Dickson's former associates in the fur trade were to furnish the personnel of the enterprise, and trade in buffalo wool and robes was to form a special feature of the undertaking. The Red River Valley was selected as the site of the adventure also because it was believed to be the property of the Hudson's Bay Company, in which Selkirk was a large stockholder.

There was ample reason for regarding the Red River Valley as a part of Canada. La Salle, at the mouth of the Misssissippi on April 9, 1682, had laid claim to all the land drained by the Mississippi and its tributaries. Franquelin's map, made after the return of La Salle to Quebec, shows the Red River of the North outside the boundaries of Louisiana. There was no change in the boundaries of Louisiana in the transfers by which it came into the possession of the United States. On

¹⁹ Major Lawrence Taliaferro, "Auto-biography," in Minnesota Historical Collections, 6:247, 248; Ramsay Crooks to John Lawe, June 18, 1817; Dickson's American passport issued April 27, 1822, in Wisconsin Historical Collections, 19:462; 20:254; "Sketch of Life and Times of James Witherall," in Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 4:113; Chester Martin, Lord Selkirk's Work in Canada, 102 (Oxford Historical and Literary Studies, vol. 7—Oxford, 1916); William Kingsford, History of Canada, 9:144 (Toronto, 1887–1898).

the other hand, the charter of the Hudson's Bay Company gave to that organization the drainage basin of Hudson Bay, which included the Red River Valley. Moreover, the United States had done nothing either by way of exploration or of settlement to give it a claim to this region.²⁰

There is some evidence that Dickson and Selkirk believed that they might occupy the valley and be within their rights. Rumors came to Prairie du Chien that Dickson intended to build a fort for twenty men and two cannon on the height of land at Lake Traverse where he expected the boundary to be located. Goods were brought to Lake Traverse from the Hudson's Bay Company's factories as cheaply, Dickson said, as they could be brought to Montreal. They were hauled up the valley on carts built for the purpose, the forerunners of the St. Paul-Pembina carts of later days. Plans providing for a settlement at the Grand Forks probably included trapping, agriculture, and the collection of buffalo robes and wool.²¹

In spite of the fears of the United States Indian office officials at Prairie du Chien and at St. Louis that Dickson and Selkirk were plotting to use the Indians to destroy the Americans on the upper Mississippi or at least to deprive them of their commerce, there was really no danger of either. Neither Dickson nor Selkirk had any desire to destroy anyone, and as for turning the fur trade of this region into new channels, there were too many obstacles in the way to success. By the convention of October 20, 1818, the forty-ninth parallel was made the boundary between the United States and Canada as far as the Rocky Mountains, and that agreement made the untrammeled occupation by the British of the Red River Val-

²⁰ Frank Bond, Historical Sketch of Louisiana and the Louisiana Purchase, 4 (Washington, 1912); Beckles Willson, The Great Company, 272; 326 (Toronto, 1899). A reproduction of Franquelin's map may be found in Binger Hermann's Louisiana Purchase and Our Title: West of the Rocky Mountains, 13 (Washington, 1898).

²¹ Niles' Weekly Register, 14: 388 (August 1, 1818); Dickson to Lawe, June 19, 1817; William Dickson to Lawe, April 18, 1821, in Wisconsin Historical Collections, 10: 135, 140.

ley impossible. Moreover the Northwest Company had a monopoly of the fur trade north of the boundary, and the American Fur Company with the support of the United States government was rapidly gaining control of Dickson's old territory on the upper Mississippi and the St. Peter's. Although Dickson was able to take some of his Mississippi Indians and his old associates of Prairie du Chien and Green Bay to the Red River, they did not remain long in the new country. Grasshoppers prevented the development of any agricultural projects; hostility between the Sioux and the Chippewa prevented any peaceful establishment in the mid-valley region; and finally, the death of Selkirk in 1820 withdrew his enthusiastic support, and, in part, his financial backing. Under this accumulation of reverses Dickson finally acknowledged that the fur trade was so uncertain that there was no profit in it.

Dickson died at Drummond Island in 1823 when on his way to Prairie du Chien. The previous year he had taken his family east with the intention of making his home near his brothers in Upper Canada after nearly forty years in the Northwest.²² He had hoped to secure this region and its trade for England, but ignorance, or indifference, or engrossment in more weighty matters had prevented the fruition of his hopes, and Minnesota became one of the United States and not a part of the British Empire.

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²² Taliaferro Journals, January 12, 1822, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society; Nile's Weekly Register, 18:257 (June 10, 1820); Wisconsin Historical Collections, 10:135; 11:350; 20:52, 105–107, 109–113, 154, 164; "Powell's Recollections," in Wisconsin Historical Society, Proceedings, 1912, p. 147; Captain John Gaff to Colonel H. C. Darling, in Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 23:525; American State Papers: Foreign Relations, 4:398.



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